

The Freedom to Breathe

Believe the Facts, Not the Fears

The Helena, MT Study

In a study published in a recent edition of the British Medical Journal, researchers found that hospital admissions for heart attacks in Helena, Montana, fell by 40% during the six months that a smokefree workplaces law was implemented. The number quickly returned to its former level after the law was struck down in court. This study is especially important when you consider that the leading cause of health care costs in Minnesota is treating heart disease. This study suggests that “smoke-free laws not only protect people from the long-term dangers of secondhand smoke but that they may also be associated with a rapid decrease in heart attacks.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) researchers commenting on the study said, “[t]he data are sufficient to warrant caution regarding exposure to secondhand smoke.” They advised patients at risk for heart disease to “avoid all indoor environments that permit smoking.” The CDC researchers also reiterated the US Surgeon General’s statement that “much of this important health risk is preventable by the implementation of comprehensive smoke-free policies similar to the policy that was implemented in Helena for six months.

In his commentary, Terry Pechacek, Associate Director of Science at CDC's Office on Smoking and Health, wrote that the research underscores evidence that secondhand smoke rapidly increases the tendency of blood to clot, which can restrict flow to the heart. Pechacek said the new study strengthens the growing body of research pointing to potentially fast and acute reactions to secondhand smoke.

What the Opposition Will Say

Recently, opposition to the Freedom to Breathe Act in Minnesota has undertaken a concerned effort in legislative committees, meetings with legislators, and in public blogs to undermine the results of this landmark study. In particular, they have reported that:

- The number of heart attacks in Helena dropped from seven to four, which is a statistically insignificant number, and that
- Helena experienced the same decline four years ago—long before it implemented a smoking.

The Truth

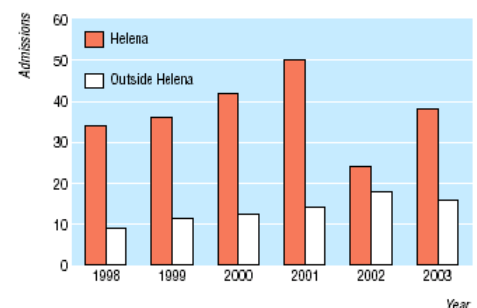
The opposition is very mistaken on both counts, and by being so, works to undermine the important message of this study: all Minnesotans risk their cardiovascular health when they are exposed to secondhand smoke.

Countering the point that the number of heart attacks dropped from seven to four and is statistically insignificant

This statement is painfully uneducated. According to even the most conservative statistical analysis, there are less than five chances in 100 that the drop in heart attacks in Helena was a random drop. By making the claim, any person doing so is claiming that they alone are smart enough to draw a conclusion that none of the statisticians at the British Medical Journal and CDC agree with. CDC looked at the results of this study and also looked at the literature on cardiovascular disease and secondhand smoke and concluded that the results of this survey were not only statistically significant, but also biologically and epidemiologically plausible.

Countering the point that Helena experienced the same decline four years ago—long before it implemented a smoking ban

The graph tells the story. Number of heart attacks admissions in 2002: 24. Number of heart attack admissions in 1998: 35. Also, this argument does not take into consideration that there had been an upward trend over a number of years in Helena, and a significant drop happened even within this trend.



Admissions for acute myocardial infarction during six month periods June-November before, during (2002), and after the smoke-free ordinance (ordinance did not apply outside Helena). The law was implemented on 5 June 2002

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For more information, contact the Minnesota Office of Public Advocacy at

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Or visit our website at www.americanheart.org